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ABSTRACT

Within the fundamental context of "how children learn to read," attention is drawn towards an understanding of the "components" that are necessary for the child to move from oral language to early literacy. Looking at this transition requires the educator to consider whether literacy can develop as naturally for the child as speaking, or if not, what specific training and development beyond exposure to print it requires. Likewise, what is the role of the child's home environment in this process, as well as the school's to foster literacy? These are essential questions for the educator and parent alike. This paper addresses these issues within the context of early literacy development in children. First, the paper reviews the literature on children's early book behavior and the caregiver's role. It then discusses phonemic awareness--what it is, why it is important, and how to teach it. The paper also examines the research on the "Great Debate"--code-oriented versus whole language approaches to reading instruction. It finds that learning to read, although not a natural process, is essential to a child's well being in a literature-driven society, and that early literacy is as much a family responsibility as it is a school responsibility. (NKA)

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# Early Components to Childhood Literacy

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# Early Components to Childhood Literacy

## Introduction

Children begin school with varied literacy skills easily masked by their abundant energy and enthusiasm at becoming new learners and community members. A child's principle connection to the learning community is through oral language. They **speak** with the teacher, new classmates, and their parents. As educators, we can reliably depend on an oral language being in place when students first enter school. What we cannot presume as sufficient is that an appropriate foundation for emergent literacy is also present. Within the fundamental context of **how children learn to read,** my attention is drawn towards an understanding of the **components** that are necessary for the child to move from oral language to early literacy. Looking at this transition requires the educator to consider whether literacy can develop as naturally for the child as speaking, or if not, what specific training and development beyond exposure to print it requires. Likewise, what is the role of the child's' home environment in this process, as well as the school to foster literacy ? These are essential questions for the educator and parent alike. It is the intent of this paper to address these issues within the context of early literacy development in children.

## Review of Literature

### Children's Early Book Behavior

**The value of early book gifting** (Wade & Moore, 1996) is examined in a follow-up study of children whose families were given books and information about libraries. The Bookstart pilot project responded to researchers ideas that children's exposure to books at a very early age is important for literacy development. In an attempt to examine this further as well as promote positive attitudes about books, book gifts were made to 6-9 month old babies of inner city families by local libraries. The results of this initial study were encouraging enough to warrant a follow-up study.

In this follow-up study, the book sharing behavior of those who received book gifts is compared to a group whose families received no gift back. Eight focus points for observation measuring children's **active participation of book sharing with parent** were considered. In each case, intervention group children, Bookstart children, scored higher and made more frequent use of the behaviors regarded as important foundations for early literacy. Those behaviors included: shows keen interest, focuses on book, points to text/pictures, tries to turn page, predicts, joins in, asks questions, and answers questions. These results confirm the positive attitudes found in the Pilot Study that are considered important foundations for early literacy

The Caregivers Role in Emergent Literacy

Due to the changing role of parents in our society, the responsibility for emergent literacy will rest principally in the hands of day care providers (Schuman & Relihan, 1990).Accordingly, in 1995, it is expected that 2 in 3 preschool children will have both parents working, and by the year 2000, 80% of children under 5 will have mothers in full time employment. The importance of emergent literacy is examined for the benefit of the caregiver, especially as it relates to the changing role of **Book sharing** in **maximizing literacy development**. The authors caution their audience that the dated Story Time ritual, that of gathering around the feet of the storyteller, where once a form of entertainment for children, is now considered an **essential link to literacy**. As such, the caregiver need employ various techniques to make literature link to literacy.

**Prereading activities** are where the teacher discusses the story, and fingerpoints to the title, and author. During read aloud, the teacher tracks the print with the movement of their finger. This helps children realize that print talks. Developing a sense of print and a connection to things in their world are strong indicators for a child's success in learning to read and write. To aid comprehension, children are provided with schema to assist them with predicting outcomes, making inferences and drawing conclusions. They are encouraged to discuss and guess at the outcome, as well as words that may be intentionally omitted in

order to promote development of their language skills. The aim is to structure an environment that is rich in print and gives children basic literacy concepts at a very early age.

## A Primer on Phonemic Awareness: What it is, Why it's Important, and How to Teach it?

Snider (1995) defines phonemic awareness as the conscious awareness that words are made up of phonemes or sounds. English has 2 to 3 dozen phonemes that blend to form every word possible. Phonemic awareness requires an ability to attend to one sound in the context of other sounds in a word. Because speech sounds are not discreet but are "coarticulated", this ability does not come easily.

The **importance of phonemic awareness to reading and spelling** is multi-faceted. Unlike a Japanese logo-graphic language where symbols convey meaning, the English alphabetic letters represent sounds. Meaning can only be achieved when these letters are translated into sounds and then back into spoken vocabulary. This process is known as decoding. If a child cannot **recognize** different sounds in a word, they will have difficulty making the connection between letters and sounds, and **sounding out**, or reading words. Using the word /c//a//t/ as an example, if a child is not phonemically aware of all 3 sounds, but instead only the first and last, their **tendency** will be to decode the word as **cheetah** as opposed to cat.

The author cites Torgesen and colleagues for categorizing phonemic awareness tasks into **blending tasks**, Phonemic synthesis, and **segmenting tasks**, Phonemic analysis. According to Wagner & Torgesen, acquisition of early reading skills is **highly correlated** to performance on both blending and segmenting. The importance of phonemic awareness to beginning reading is substantiated by much research. The author cites numerous studies indicating the high correlations between phonemic awareness and reading achievement, nonetheless, comments that the extent to which it is responsible for learning remains unclear. Still, phonemic awareness is an indicator that children understand the nature of phonetics, and it is integral to development of the alphabetic principle. Referring to Juel, Griffith,& Gough, (1986), students who lack phonemic awareness probably do not benefit from phonics instruction. Memorizing letter sound correspondences doesn't necessarily mean they know how to, or will use them. They may be memorizing visual wholes. According to Blackman, lack of phonemic awareness will hinder children from acquiring the alphabet principle and in turn, limit their ability to decode. Again, we return to the above example of the word cheetah and cat.

There are two basic components to **teaching** phonemic awareness, **auditory blending** and **segmenting** (Lewkowicz in Snider, 1995). Auditory blending should be taught before segmenting. In blending, the teacher pronounces the sounds in the word and students repeat in a "fast way". Teacher models activity first. In the example given, teacher tells students that she is

going to say a word in a slow way and then she will say it fast. Teacher says **'Fooot-Baaaal'**. Then **'Football'**. Then she will invite students to respond with a fast word after she says it in a slow way, offering to show students a picture afterward. The teacher can increase difficulty by saying sounds instead of syllables in words. She'll tell students that she can say a word the slow way, i.e. **'Mmmmmmm-aaaaaaa-t**, or fast, **'Mat'**. Then she'll indicate to student that she'll say it slow, and the student should say it fast. The opposite of blending is **segmenting**. Here the student vocalizes the sounds in a word. The teacher models segmenting process to begin instruction. We have the example of the teacher telling students that she can say the sounds in the word mat. Listen.'Mmmmmmm-aaaaaaaa-t'. Rhyming activities can also be included to develop phonemic manipulation.

## Research on "The Great Debate": Code-Oriented Versus Whole Language Approaches to Reading Instruction

Foorman (1984) frames the classic debate between a whole language or phonics approach to beginning reading instruction, offering descriptions of each methodology including relevant research regarding their effectiveness. Whole language is a **meaning** based approach to reading instruction emphasizing the whole word and utilizing context clues. Phonics refers to various teaching methods which introduce readers to correspondences between letters and sounds. The whole word approach is known as a "look-say" or sight-word method (N.B.Smith in Foorman, 1995).

Similarity exists between whole language and Allen's language experience approach where reading comprehension is a natural extension of oral language, and where knowledge of language structure enables the reader to make guesses about words. Decoding skills are considered to be minimally used by beginning readers. Conversely, Phonics view prereaders as knowing oral language, but without the decoding ability to translate print into language.

The basis of the whole language argument is that reading is a natural extension of oral language competencies. Instruction in the alphabet principle is considered unnecessary because oral language competencies support use of meaningful context. Paralleling the ideas of Chomsky, since language is learned in whole words and meaningful context, literacy can best be learned the same way. Research (Gough and Hillinger (1980), in Foorman) however, disputes the whole word / whole language claim that learning to read is as natural as learning to speak. Humans may be biologically programmed for language, but illiterate children therefore are indicators that reading and writing are not natural processes. In view of this, the author's advocates phonological training for the beginning reader.

Challenging the role of context in beginning reading, the author points to Nicolson's findings that context provides a compensatory, rather than central role. Additional research contradicts the claim (Smith 1971 in Foorman) that readers do not process every word, and suggests that eye movement studies indicate that skilled readers process every word and usually all

letters (Just&Carpenter, 1987 in Foorman). Thus, reading is visual processing of letters. In contrast, it was found that readers rely on context as a compensatory strategy when they can't decode efficiently (Perfetti, 1985 in Foorman).

The author examines the relationships between phonological awareness, reading and spelling. The results of Foorman, Jenkins & Francis study indicate that a high probability exists for children being able to read and spell words if they can segment words, particularly exceptional patterns. This contradicts whole language concept that words are read holistically. The relevant unit for reading instruction, whole word, versus , phoneme is examined too. Research by Haskell (1992) examines 48 first graders who were assigned to **phoneme**, **onset-rime**, **whole word**, or **unseen control** (whole language) groups. Pretests indicated similarity in intellectual ability, phonemic segmentation, reading achievement, and ability to identify 40 regular and 20 exception words. Each group was correspondingly trained using individual cardboard letter sets for these 60 words. Posttest results indicate that the phoneme and onset-rime group were significantly more accurate than whole word groups, and in general the onset-rime group outperformed the other 3 groups. This and other research presented favors explicit instruction in alphabetic coding over a whole word approach.

Why learning to read is not a natural process.

Learning to read is critical to a child's well-being (Lyon, 1998). The author's viewpoint personifies the US National Institute of Child Health and Human Development's belief that hope for a fulfilling productive life depends on the ability to read in our literature driven society. NICHD reading research revolves around 3 concerns: 1.) How children learn to read. 2.)What factors impede reading level. 3.)What instructional approaches are most beneficial?

Reading is the product of decoding and comprehension (Gough in Lyon, 1998). The author warns us not be tricked by the simplicity of this idea. Success depends on the ability of the child to be aware of the **sound parts** in spoken words called **phonemes**. Assessment of this skill is auditory only. Phonic skills assessment differs in that a child's ability to link sounds (phonemes) with letters is measured. Phoneme awareness is both crucial and difficult in beginning reading. In order to read an alphabetic language, children need know that written spellings systematically represent spoken sounds. If they cannot perceive sounds in spoken words, i.e."hear" the /at/ sound in fat and perceive that the difference lies the first sound, they will have **difficulty decoding and sounding out new words**. Reading becomes a burden for the child. Being able to detect the seams in speech, unglue the sounds (phonemic awareness), and learn which sounds go with which letters (phonics) is an essential process for

the beginning reader. There are additional skills that need follow. The beginning reader must develop automaticity in decoding and word recognition in order to facilitate enjoyment and understanding. Research by NICHD indicates the importance for the reader to make meaning from print. This understanding occurs when readers **link ideas in print to their own experiences**. They can summarize, predict, and clarify what they have read.

The author points to the linguistic gymnastics required in learning to read as the principle reason why reading cannot be considered a natural process. He also asserts that scientific research does not support the claim that context and text can replace decoding skills. Referring to Gough (1988), Lyon indicates that only about 10 to 20% of the time can content words can be predicted from text. Difficulties in areas of phonemic awareness, phonetic understanding and application, or the ability to make reading meaningful, can impede reading development. Furthermore, stimulating literacy experiences from birth onward give children an edge in vocabulary development, reading goals, and concepts of print. At risk children enter kindergarten and elementary school without these experiences. Children with limited bedtime and laptime reading typically have not engaged in language play that develops an awareness of sound structure and pattern. Research supported by NICHD clearly indicates that lack of phoneme awareness skills is a key predictor of difficulty in learning to read as well as reading acquisition.

**Summary**

This review examines early components to childhood literacy. It is intended to provide insight into the components necessary for the child to move from oral language to early literacy. This period represents the foundation for how children learn to read. There are a number components necessary for success in early reading development.

- The value of early book gifting has been shown to produce positive attitudes about reading and early book behavior which are regarded as important foundations to early literacy.
- The role of the caregiver in emergent literacy is instrumental due to changes in parental roles as well as implementing new educational methods for linking children at this stage to literacy.
- Phonemic Awareness is the understanding that speech is composed of individual sounds, phonemes. Children must be able to recognize phonemes in words if they are going to be able to successfully acquire the alphabetic principle. Research indicates that deficits in phonemic awareness predict difficulty in learning to read. Phonemic Awareness is taught by blending and segmenting activities designed to enhance student awareness of sound units.
- There are two distinctive methods for teaching reading, whole language and phonics. A whole language approach views reading as a natural extension of oral language competencies. Knowledge of context allows the reader to make guesses about unknown words. A

phonics approach to teaching reading relies on developing phonemic awareness, learning letter-sound correspondence and decoding so that the reader can sound out words. Empirical evidence clearly favors a code approach to reading instruction.

• Learning to read is essential to a child's well being in a literature driven society. If children cannot perceive sounds in spoken words, they will have trouble decoding or sounding out written words. The ability of children to link ideas in print to their own experience enhances early reading comprehension. The linguistic gymnastics involved in learning to read indicate that reading is not an extension of oral competency and therefore not a natural process.

## Implications

Early literacy is as much a family responsibility as it is a school responsibility. Without question, children who are denied important exposure to print during their emergent literacy years are at a distinct disadvantage. Although this characteristic may cross all socio-economic lines, lack of exposure tends to be more prevalent in poverty stricken families. Exposure to books seems socio-economic and cultural. I believe most highly literate families stress book reading. The review of childrens's early book behavior points to the inherent importance of introducing book reading to pre-schoolers. Related evidence indicates that preschoolers who are ahead at the start of formal reading instruction tend to maintain their position. The natural extension

to these results would be a follow-up study to measure the book-sharing qualities of 5 year olds who participated in study. The role of the parent in children's earliest literacy is extremely important too.

Kids benefit by being surrounded with literature. Benefiting from the abundance of research concerning children's early literacy, the caregiver can utilize differing strategies to provide kids with needed activities that develop literacy. The storytelling ritual can be an extremely effective vehicle for developing concepts of print, introducing children to questioning and predicting strategies, and promoting language skills and recall. Parents should and can extend this kind of learning at home. It behooves us to train caregivers in reading instruction, as well as parents, so children benefit from these positive influences at home and at preschool. The quality of a preschool environment is equally as important as the home. The role of economics impacts on resources for both too. Actual instruction in public school may be less determined by economics though since curriculum is state mandated. Development of phonemic awareness based on California Language Arts content standards begins in kindergarten by tracking sounds of phonemes.

The importance of Phonemic Awareness is again reflected in language arts content standards for first grade. Recommendations of literature reviewed within suggest continued phonemic awareness development in subsequent grades, yet content standards indicate no such training after first grade. I see no testing present after

grade 1 to assess phonemic awareness skills. However, phonics instruction continues through grade 3. This opens the possibility that the student may not be able to integrate phonics instruction properly due to lack of phonemic awareness. Reading is no different than most skills. Each level builds on the other. Students who lack phonemic awareness develop deficit in literacy.

Children can only memorize so many words by sight. In a logo-**graphic** language like Chinese, words are initially easier to understand because they make immediate sense. However, the leaning curve for Chinese readers is slow and gradual and the number of new vocabulary items acquired gradually decreases as memory overloads (Rozin & Gleitman, 1977, in Snider). Given this, a whole language approach to teaching reading has distinct limits. A more reasonable approach is a suitable mix between phonics and whole language that will allow for children's vocabulary growth and their ability to understand new and more complex words. There is a place for whole language instruction, especially as it relates to using the benefits of language structure to assist in reading development. Because reading is not a natural process, the premise on which whole language exists is open to conjecture.

The importance of reading development to a child's overall health and well-being is manifest. Yet our society has opted for other graphic forms of communication that numb our capacities. Marshall McCluen said it well. "The Medium Is The Message". Unlike television, reading offers child and adult alike the possibility to **engage** & **interact** in every world and in every way possible.

Literature's richness draws us inside life. It both approximates and exceeds our spoken language. To be able to **fully** participate in this dance between print and meaning, requires an adequate development in the early childhood components to literacy mentioned heretofore. No doubt we have the ingredients necessary to make every child a good reader. We just need to assure their practice both **at home** and at school. California content standards assuring proper instruction in reading are a positive step towards this. I am encouraged by the educational technology and research available to our profession. Still, the medium is the message.

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